

A Seat at the Table

The phenomenon that I have observed year after year is that the azaleas bloom, not by the calendar or the weather, but by Passover, be it in March or April. As so too, for us, there occurs a phenomenon. A bloom burst forth in our hearts; a joy in the celebration of Passover, the celebration by our people, begun in our ancient past. Just as the fragrances and delicacy of the flowers of spring evoke wondrous responses from our senses, the holiday of Passover evokes for each of us the bittersweet memories of our celebrations with the family's of our childhood, not ancient, but surely past. We remember with great love and wonder the legacy of family and tradition that was passed on to us, and we anticipate with love for each of you, as our family continues to grow, the opportunity to grow new traditions along with it.

- Melba Nedler, Grandmother

My mom's voice did not waver once as it lovingly delivered my grandmother's *Azaleas* poem, alerting us, as it did each year, that our Passover seder had begun. However, I quickly grasped that these beautiful words written long ago by my grandmother and spoken presently by my mom would be the only conventional element of this year's seder. As my aunt passed around the 2012 *haggadah* that would facilitate our family discussion for the evening, the usual disinterest amongst the receivers was replaced with an undercurrent of importance. My aunt took her seat next to my mom at the head table and introduced what had been placed in front of everybody: *Next Year in a Just World: A Global Justice Haggadah*. For the next three hours I remained rooted to my chair, completely enthralled by my aunt's ability to connect the ancient story of Jewish persecution with those of people who were suffering from some of the most pressing issues of the present: refugee crises and genocide, global hunger, poverty, violence against women and LGBTQ individuals, and the oppression of minoritized groups. One by one each of my aunts and female cousins, my mom, and my older sister sparked meaningful conversations and asked difficult questions until the room nearly went dark. This is the world I come from - a world of brilliant women who recognize their capacity to make a difference, who commit themselves to the advancement of justice, and who comprise almost the entirety of the head table. These are the women who motivate my concern for social issues, policy, and politics.

I have spent the many years since this night trying to reconcile this world that I come from with the world that I live in - a world that is still full of brilliant women who recognize their capacity to make a difference, who still commit themselves to the advancement of justice, yet who are rarely expected to, and more so, are hindered from, taking a seat at the head table. At twelve years old I was exposed to what was possible when women stepped into leadership roles, but for much of my life I watched as my country's staggeringly low percentage of women-held Congressional seats failed to meet the global average of 24.1 percent representation. I watched as the women who did run for government offices were critiqued for their appearance, their age, and their wardrobe choices rather than their merit. I watched as my fellow citizens elected a celebrity with no political background to America's highest office rather than elect a woman with extensive experience. So when, on the first day of Global Socioeconomic and Political Processes, a course that I took freshman year, my professor stood at the front of the lecture hall and read a list comprised of the countries that have higher female representation in government than the United States, I was simultaneously dismayed, unsurprised, and impassioned. With over 70 countries on the list, she did not have sufficient time to read it in its entirety before her lecture began. I cannot recall a single other topic she covered during lecture that day, as my mind was racing in an attempt to quell my bubbling frustration at the lack of America's progress on gender equality, most notably in our government systems.

While there have been female leaders all over the world, the United States' proverbial glass ceiling, far from being cracked or smashed, felt to me in this moment as though it had been reinforced with double glazing. And as I thought back to the women in my family leading a Passover seder steeped in the tradition which had since become my guiding light and the most integral part of my identity, *'tzedek, tzedek, tirdof'* — 'Justice, justice shall you pursue', I realized that my aim should not be to come to terms with the diverging examples set by my family's tradition of female leadership and set by the United States' lack of female representation in government, but should instead be heeding the advice my grandmother shared in her *Azaleas* poem. As a member of the younger generation, and as the world can grow and can change, I have the opportunity to alter America's traditions of female representation in government and cultivate new ones in its place - the ones that had been modeled for me firsthand.

And so I became a woman on a mission. For young women in the United States, female-identifying role models in positions of power are few and far between. That the women in my family had reverently cultivated the sentiment that women deserve a seat at the head table was an immense privilege, and I was not naive enough to believe that everyone shared my good fortune. As such, gaining an understanding of the gender dynamics that have shaped America's present political systems and finding ways to combat them to the best of my ability became the focal point of my life. I spent countless hours at a local library volunteering as a tutor for a girls youth program that encouraged literacy and academic success for young females. Very few of those hours were actually spent working with students, as more often than not, I sat in the poorly lit corner of the library willing anybody in search of assistance to show up. However, I was never discouraged, because when those few little girls did show up - girls whose parents were sometimes illiterate themselves or girls who had learning disabilities that their school did not have the resources to adequately address - I could not help but picture what their futures might hold with just a bit of support. Every time I helped a young girl spell a new word or solve a new math problem, I envisioned her one day running for local office and funding future programs just like this one. When I worked on voter registration campaigns, every time I engaged a woman in a conversation about the importance of voting, I imagined it sparked within her a lifelong interest in politics that would lead her to vote for the female candidates of the future. In these roles I was once again trying to integrate the world that I lived in with one that felt entirely disparate, but this time it was the world of the future. And in my mind, that future looked incredibly bright for female leadership.

In this way, though I have been so greatly influenced by my family's past, I am also very much a product of my time. My grandmother foresaw that with each new generation and each new year would come new traditions, but she could never have guessed that I would become the critical link between my family's historic customs and the pressing issues of the present. In 2020, as I entered the Zoom room of the first meeting I would be leading as an International Women's Climate Justice and Sustainability Research Consultant for the United States Green Chamber of Commerce, I felt an overwhelming sense of what I can only describe as a paradoxical mix of déjà vu and unprecedented-ness. The meeting was made up of internationally celebrated female

leaders spearheading battles against climate change, discussing how to best promote and support efforts in both women's rights and environmental sustainability in a way that would mitigate future climate change impacts. I could not help but find the entire experience akin to the Passover seder that had set me on the path to becoming a civically-engaged person nearly ten years ago. I was once again rooted to my chair, completely enthralled by the ability of a group of women to lead and to engage others in relevant discourse. However, this time was also unique. Now, one of the seats at the head table was reserved for me and I was one of the women to spark necessary conversations, now about the importance of female leadership in one of the most pressing issues of my generation. These globally renowned women in leadership positions - award recipients, UN representatives, and NGO founders - actively listened and responded to what I, as an intern, brought to the discussion. For me, this moment reaffirmed what I already knew. I wanted to sit at tables comprised of women for the rest of my life, I wanted to see this reflected in every aspect of the country, and I would do whatever I could to make that dream a reality.

Of one thing I am absolutely certain: women deserve a seat at the head table - be it in the workplace, at the Passover seder, or most importantly, in the governmental sphere. Across geographies and income levels, disparities between men and women persist in the United States in the form of pay gaps, uneven opportunities for advancement, and perhaps most importantly, in the unbalanced representation in important decision-making. The only way to address and overcome these preconceptions and barriers is to have more women in positions of leadership; providing the support and role models women desperately need. Women are not a minority - they make up half of the world's population, and as such, the active participation of women in legislatures is critical to effectively addressing the needs of all citizens. Until America's governing bodies mirror the make-up of its population, true democracy cannot be realized.

It is my hope that my life experiences will allow me to stand up at a Passover seder 40 years from now and inspire the next generation of women in my family to become civically engaged citizens, passionate about the critical issues of their time. But more so, it is my hope that my life experiences will allow me to pursue a career that will forge change in this country for the next generation of women *everywhere*. In the field of public policy as it pertains to women's

rights, I will work to ensure that policymakers advance approaches centered in equity, fairness, and justice, which will ideally even the playing field in a way that encourages more and more women to seek political leadership roles. While it may be a lofty aspiration to change American institutions that have for so long been saturated with patriarchal practices, I believe increasing female representation in government is where the work must begin. I dream of a world in which nobody questions why all nine justices of the Supreme Court are women, or bats an eye at a female-identifying citizen serving as President of the United States. In this way, I dream of an American society that resembles an extension of the family my grandmother once eloquently described, a society that *remembers with great love and wonder the legacy of tradition, but anticipates the opportunity to grow new traditions* as the times evolve and as women take their seat at the head table.